

Dr. Simon Baruch and His Fight
For Free Public Baths

MAJOR THOMAS E. KEYS

Medical Administrative Corps, Army of the United States

and

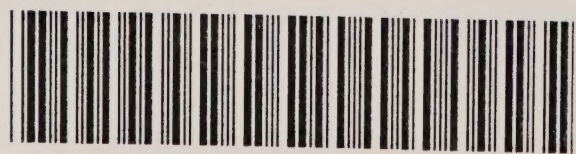
FRANK H. KRUSEN, M.D.

Section on Physical Medicine, Mayo Clinic

ROCHESTER, MINN.



Reprinted from the
Archives of Physical Medicine
September, 1945, Volume XXVI, pp. 549-557



22200056520

DR. SIMON BARUCH AND HIS FIGHT FOR FREE PUBLIC BATHS

MAJOR THOMAS E. KEYS

Medical Administrative Corps, Army of the United States

and

FRANK H. KRUSEN, M.D.

Section on Physical Medicine, Mayo Clinic

ROCHESTER, MINN.

"When Minevra, as the Poets fancy, made a Bath for Hercules, and both became the Deitys of all the Baths in the World, we were then taught, Kind Reader, what we still find true, that Bathing is of great use after hard Labour, and mighty refresheth all weary Persons." — Thomas Guidott, in his "An Apology for the Bath," 1705.

In looking through the rare book file in the Army Medical Library, one of us (T. E. K.) ran across a modestly bound scrapbook which had the title "Public Baths." This book had been housed in the glass case section of the library, the section containing some of the library's important rarities. On first glance, it did not seem to be important enough to be shelved next to the first edition of Darwin's "Origin of Species" and in close proximity to Oliver Wendell Holmes' "Contagiousness of Puerperal Fever." But on closer examination it definitely belonged with these rarities, for it was documentary evidence of one man's ten year fight, and a successful one, for free public baths in America.

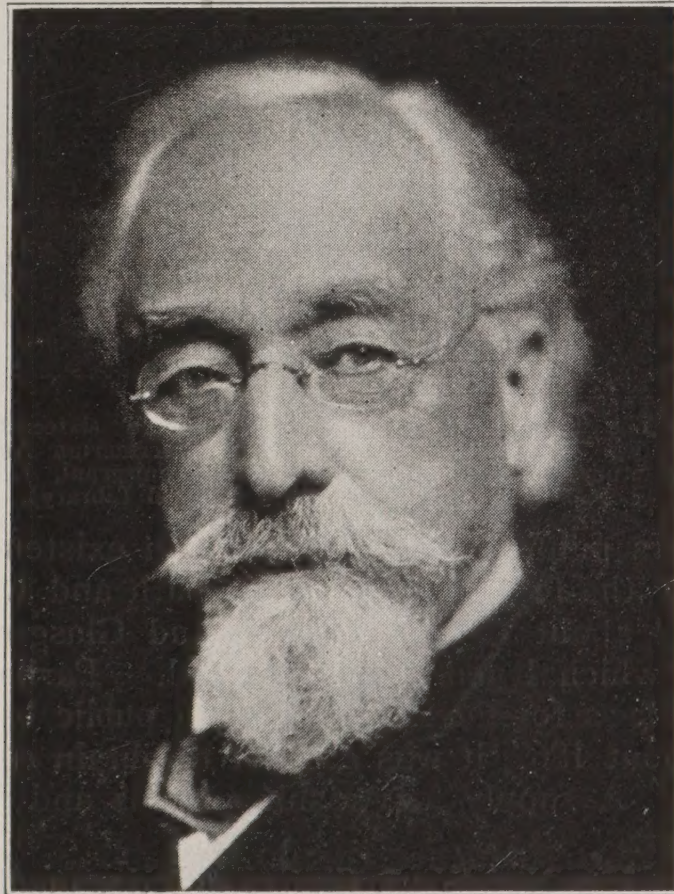


Fig. 1. — Dr. Simon Baruch (1840-1921).

• To those of us who enjoy a good shower bath at frequent intervals, it would seem strange not to have this accommodation. However, it is only a matter of years since Dr. Simon Baruch (fig. 1) introduced the shower

bath, or, as it used to be called, "therain water bath," to our country. But much more important for our country's health than his introduction of the shower bath is his making available to the masses of our people free public baths, a most important but much overlooked hygienic measure for the prevention of disease. This then is the story.

The practice of bathing is probably as old as man himself. Man has always enjoyed water, and it does not take much conjecture to believe he often has derived therapeutic benefits from its use. Certainly when he was tired or dirty, water refreshed him. As Klebs¹ has shown, archaeologic research has revealed provisions for bathing in water and stream. Primitive peoples also believed fervently in the healing powers of springs.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there seems to have been a revival of the use of baths. Figure 2 shows the shower baths at Aachen. Aachen.



Fig. 2. — The shower baths at Aachen in the sixteenth or seventeenth century. From Franciscus Blondel's "Thermarum Aquisgranensium et Porcetatum elucidatio et thaumaturgia" Aquisgrani, J. C. Clemens, 1688 (courtesy of the Army Medical Library).

For many years public baths have been in existence in Europe. According to Baruch,² the first modern public bath and washhouse was established in Liverpool about 1842. London and Glasgow soon followed by building baths for which 1 penny was charged. Parliament took an active interest and passed laws for the maintenance of public baths.

In America about 1860, it was difficult to obtain enough water in hotel rooms for bathing. A supply for washing hands and face once a day was considered sufficient.

Dr. Baruch³ came to New York City to practice medicine in 1881. Previous to this time he had resided in Camden, S. C. Because of its size, New York City afforded a great contrast to Camden, and soon there was a transi-

1. Klebs, A. C.: Balneology in the Middle Ages, Tr. Am. Climat. & Clin. A. 32:15, 1916.

2. Baruch, Simon: A Plea for Public Baths, Together with an Inexpensive Method for Their Hygienic Utilization, Dietetic Gaz. 7:89 (May) 1891.

3. Simon Baruch: J. Am. A. Prom. Hyg. & Pub. Baths 4:7, 1922.

tion from a successful practitioner to a high-spirited public citizen and philanthropist.

Baruch was quick to observe the filthy condition of the poor in New York. One only had to ride on a crowded street car to whiff the "tenement odor," which he vividly described as follows:²

The so-called tenement odor which so often offends the sensitive olfactories in crowded street cars and other assemblies of the poor, emanates from the decomposed secretions of the skin, which have accumulated upon their persons and found lodgment in their unventilated clothing.

While, in 1891, the New Yorkers of means had one or more bath tubs in their homes, the poor classes had no bathing facilities whatever. Dr. Baruch explored the tenements and found appalling conditions. An average tenement was found to consist of one front or rear room with windows and two or three dark bedrooms in which people were all huddled together. He found the water supply for an entire floor, usually occupied by four families, to be obtained from a faucet in a dark hallway, where all must wash or obtain water. He also found that accommodations for servants in homes of wealthy people rarely had good bathing facilities.

To Dr. Baruch it was not only a moral obligation that the better-off New Yorkers contribute money so that uncleanness be removed from the city but also a safety measure for all households. Above all, Baruch thought that, since it was the function of the city authorities to protect the population against the causes of disease and death, they should abolish uncleanness—the ever present disease-producing factor—and the remedy was to install public baths which must, like public parks, be free.

Besides his philanthropic interest in public baths for the workers, Dr. Baruch was keenly interested from the large medical viewpoint. From 1862, when he was graduated from the Medical College of Virginia (he spent the war years as an assistant surgeon with the Confederate Army), until 1886 or thereabouts, he was interested in the study and practice of medicine generally. After 1886 he continued his private practice but placed special emphasis on water as a remedial agent. In America he became known as the leading exponent of hydrotherapy and, indeed, was often called "the apostle of bathing."

In his early fight for public baths of the indoor shower type, Dr. Baruch held that the river baths were not fit for cleansing, because bathing suits were necessary, and that furthermore there was danger of infection from polluted water. (He defined Manhattan Island as "a body of land surrounded by sewage.")⁴ He also made a point that the river baths were open only in summer and were used only by the younger and more vigorous members of the community. In this connection it is interesting to recall that Boston⁵ was probably the first city to establish and maintain the river bath (floating bath) at city expense. In 1866, five floating baths and one beach bath were established in Boston.

The first plea for rain water (shower) baths in this country was made by Dr. Baruch. It appeared as an editorial in the *Medical Times and Register of Philadelphia* for Aug. 24, 1889. While the principle of the shower bath was known to the ancients and was developed somewhat in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the modern idea of the public shower is a product of Germany and was developed by Dr. Oscar Lassar, president of the Berlin Society for People's Baths. The first public bath was constructed on this principle in 1887 in Vienna. The first shower baths of im-

4. Baruch, Simon: Public Baths, Proc. Am. A. Prom. Hyg. & Pub. Baths 5:8, 1916.

5. Cole, W. I.: Free Municipal Baths in Boston, Municipal Office, 1899, 53 pp.

portance were established in the barracks of the Kaiser Franz Grenadier Regiment of the Guard in Berlin in 1878. These were for the use of officers and enlisted men. Their facilities provided for the bathing of 300 men an hour.⁶

With the proposal of the shower type bath came Baruch's denunciation even in his time, of the "old-fashioned tub." He felt that the difficulty of keeping tubs clean and the large quantity of water they used were obstacles for the public use of baths of this type.

Although it took a ten year knock-down and drag-out fight to put over his ideas to city officials, Dr. Baruch was able, after one conference, to convince authorities of the New York Juvenile Asylum concerning his ideas of bathing. According to Dr. Baruch's⁴ suggestions, a shower type of bath was installed in 1890 (fig. 3). It consisted of sixty-eight sprinklers, 20 inches

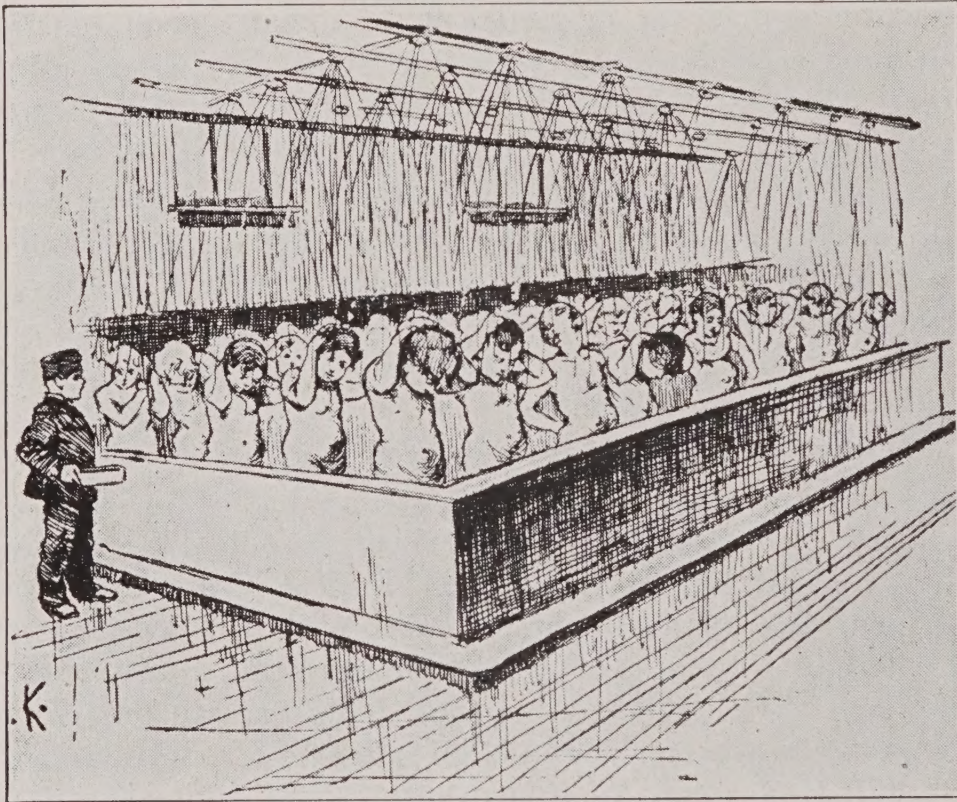


Fig. 3. — Shower bath installed at the New York Juvenile Asylum in 1890 under Dr. Baruch's guidance. From Simon Baruch's "A Plea for Public Baths." 2

(51 cm.) apart, connected by pipes near the ceiling. The water was heated by admixture with steam. It bathed 280 children in an hour, whereas formerly only 80 could be cleansed in their plunge bath.

Prior to this, Dr. Baruch had spent several months in Germany studying, at his own expense, the system of public rain baths that were there so successful. Immediately on his return from the continent in September, 1890, he read a paper before the Social Science Convention in Saratoga, N. Y. This was entitled "The Status of Water in Modern Medicine." Here he expounded his ideas for free municipal bathing. As chairman of the Committee on Hygiene of the County of New York, Dr. Baruch gave also a report on public shower baths.⁷ Both of these papers were favorably received by their audiences. One beneficial result was the erection of The Peoples Baths, financed by the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor. By the request of the altruistic Dr. H. E. Crampton, Dr. Baruch² appeared before its executive committee on Nov. 25, 1890. Here he had an intelligent appreciation and a sympathetic audience. A committee was ap-

6. Wentworth, Jeanie W.: The Inception and Development of the Idea of Free Public Baths, J. Am. A. Prom. Hyg. & Pub. Baths 5:14, 1923.

7. Watson, I. A.: Physicians and Surgeons of America, Concord, N. H., Republican Press Association, 1896, pp. 534-535.

pointed, consisting of Col. G. W. Hamilton and Dr. Gouverneur Smith. They appeared the following morning before the mayor with a petition asking for the free use of public water for a bath to be immediately constructed. Meanwhile Dr. Baruch had plans made for the proposed bath. These were approved on Dec. 1, 1890; a lot was secured, money was appropriated and The Peoples Baths (also called the Centre Market Baths) were erected in 1891. They had accommodations for 500 bathers daily. Between 70,000 and 80,000 baths were given here each year.

Shortly after the construction of The Peoples Baths, the *New York Herald* of Oct. 25, 1891, carried an account of the inauguration of another privately financed public bath. This bath was named after Baron de Hirsch.⁵ It was located at the corner of Henry and Market streets and was used chiefly, by German, Polish and Russian Jews. About 70,000 baths were given there annually.

Mention should also be made of the erection about this time of the Demilt Dispensary Baths.⁸ These consisted of six shower baths and one tub bath and accommodated about 15,000 bathers annually.

Meanwhile other cities became interested in Dr. Baruch's proposals. Dr. Gertrude Gail Wellington, of Chicago, corresponded with him about free public baths, being especially interested in the rain water type of bath that Dr. Baruch had introduced to the United States. Largely through their joint efforts and the cooperation of Mayor Carter H. Harrison; the first free



Fig. 4. — The Carter H. Harrison Bath, Chicago. Opened in 1894, it was the first free public bath in the world.

8. Fisk, H. E.: The Introduction of Public Rain Baths in America, *Sanitarian* 36:481, 1896.

public bath in the world was constructed in Chicago. It was opened in January, 1894 (fig. 4). Several years were to elapse before New York City had its first free public bath (1901). It had been the desire of Mayor Harrison to name the first free public bath in the world after Dr. Baruch.⁹ But his untimely death intervened and the bath was named after the mayor, whose public career had been marked by his effort and interest in free public baths and other hygienic measures. Dr. Baruch's efforts were not forgotten, however, and Chicago honored him by naming its eleventh ward bath after him on April 22, 1910.¹⁰ Soon other cities followed Chicago's example, Philadelphia and Buffalo being among the first.

While Dr. Baruch's efforts for Chicago were quick to bear fruit and he had succeeded in initiating a few public baths, privately financed, he had not as yet achieved his goal—free public baths for all the needy of New York City. He approached the city officials, feeling that it was their function to make provision for these baths. In December, 1890, Dr. Baruch appeared before the city board of health. All present were sympathetic but said they had no authority to act. Baruch next approached the mayor and his board of aldermen. Alderman Henry Flegenheimer offered to head a subscription for building a free bath for the workmen with \$200. Dr. Baruch appreciated his support but wanted the expenses of the baths to come from city funds. After some delay, he was granted an audience with Mayor Grant (April 20, 1891). The mayor was not interested.

Dr. Baruch was not discouraged. He made a third attempt. He suggested to Mr. Flegenheimer that the board of aldermen appropriate \$25,000 for the construction of a municipal bathing house. This advice was followed and Mr. Flegenheimer succeeded in passing his resolution before the aldermen. But the mayor did not approve the resolution, feeling that public sentiment was not behind the issue. Flegenheimer made one more trial. He asked Dr. Baruch to help him "circumvent the mayor" by organizing the largest possible delegation of citizens to call on "his honor" as quickly as possible before the election.¹¹ No account remains of the outcome of this letter. At any rate the third attempt ended in failure.

Meanwhile two members of the state legislature of New York ardently supported Dr. Baruch. These were Otto Kempner, formerly secretary to Mr. Flegenheimer, and Goodwin Brown, of Albany. Brown prepared a bill (chapter 473, laws of 1892), approved by the governor, as follows:⁸ "It shall be lawful for any city, village, or town to establish free public baths. Any city, village or town may loan its credit or make appropriations of its funds for the purpose of establishing free public baths." This bill had no teeth to it, not being mandatory, but phrased in this way it was passed by Governor Flower. Although it was unsatisfactory in form, this bill was the first statute on public baths and served as a basis for better statutes later to be approved.

Mr. Kempner introduced his bill on Feb. 16, 1893. It was entitled "An act to establish a bureau of public baths in the City of New York, and to provide for the construction and maintenance of six new permanent public baths in said city." The act required the approval of the mayor of New York City. Dr. Baruch appeared before Mayor Gilroy on March 13, 1893. Baruch's experience with Mayor Gilroy was no better than his former experiences with Mayor Grant. The mayor was not impressed. He said that he believed there was no public sentiment in favor of such baths! Dr. J. D. Bryant, health commissioner of New York City, had also objected to the

9. Reynolds, Arthur B. (Commissioner, Department of Health, Chicago): Letter to Dr. Baruch, May 31, 1904.

10. Chicago Daily Tribune, April 22, 1910.

11. Flegenheimer, Henry (Office of the Board of Aldermen): Letter to Dr. Baruch, Oct. 22, 1891.

proposed bill, saying,¹² "To my mind this bill is so full of defects that in case it be not possible to correct them, it should be consigned to the waste paper basket of the Assembly Chamber." Because of this strong opposition, the fourth attempt to establish free municipal bath houses ended in failure.

Having failed four times to obtain the consent of the city authorities, Dr. Baruch, in 1894, again conferred with Goodwin Brown. Together they planned a mandatory bill which would make it compulsory for all cities of 50,000 population or more to establish and maintain free public baths. At that time, Goodwin Brown was a member of the New York State Commission in Lunacy. He worked hard on this bill. G. W. Hamilton also was greatly interested.¹³ As chairman of the committee of the house, he gave the bill his wholehearted support. He also fought for it in the senate. Dr. Joseph Bryant, health commissioner, aided and encouraged the passage of this bill. He was instrumental with his successor, Dr. Edson, in securing the cooperation of President Wilson of the board of health in obtaining a report from Dr. Roberts, sanitary superintendent, on the proposed locations for free baths.

The long struggle to secure adequate legislation was not in vain. The bill introduced in 1894 by Goodwin Brown¹⁴ was passed by the legislature and signed by the governor on April 18, 1895. Under this act, Yonkers opened the first bath house in October, 1896. Buffalo opened a bath house in January, 1897. Rochester, Albany, Syracuse, Troy and Utica soon followed. But New York City was still without its public baths. Why?

For New Yorkers this act remained without effect. Mayor Strong created the Mayor's Committee on Public Baths and Comfort Stations on June 25, 1895. Although this committee was directed to take immediate action, it was not until March 25, 1897, that it reported and then unfavorably. In spite of the fact that a new bath bill had been enacted, which even made provision for comfort stations, the committee, which had made an investigation of public baths in this country, as well as in Europe, concluded that no further action could be taken without additional legislation. The committee assumed erroneously that this act demanded the use of parks for bath purposes.

Public opinion was aroused and Mayor Strong was vigorously assailed in the newspapers for his neglect in the matter (fig. 5). Only by accident did Dr. Baruch happen to see the report of the mayor's committee. Unfortunately, the city health department agreed with the committee. On May 20, 1897, Dr. Baruch met with Dr. George B. Fowler, health commissioner, as well as with a city attorney. He convinced them that they were in error in their interpretation of the law.

At Dr. Baruch's suggestion the New York Academy of Medicine passed a resolution to appoint a committee to wait on the mayor and urge that he execute the mandatory bath act.¹⁵ The committee selected consisted of Drs. Baruch, R. Van Santvoord and G. B. Fowler. The following day (June 4, 1897) the committee of the academy had a very satisfactory interview with Mayor Strong. He informed them that he had in mind a lot on Rivington Street suitable for immediate construction of a bath house. Steps were immediately taken toward the building of the Rivington Street Bath but, because of contracting difficulties, four years passed before the first free public shower bath was opened to the public. In 1917, by order of the board of aldermen this bath was officially named the "Dr. Simon Baruch Public

12. Bryant, Joseph D.: Letter to Dr. Baruch, Feb. 23, 1893.

13. Baruch, Simon: The Public Baths (letter to the editor), *Sanitarian*, July, 1892, pp. 83-84.

14. Brown, Goodwin: Letter to Dr. Baruch, April 19, 1895.

15. New York Academy of Medicine: Extract from the Minutes, May 20 and June 3, 1897.

Bath." The Rivington Street Bath met with considerable success, bathing 700,000¹⁶ people the first year. Warm water, soap and towels were furnished gratis. In 1909, there were ten such institutions, bathing more than 5,000,000 people in New York and 3,000,000 in Brooklyn. In 1938, as a result of Dr. Baruch's early stimulus, there were more than 100 bath houses in operation in the United States, free or charging a nominal fee of 5 cents.¹⁶

In 1938, a WPA project was set up to remodel the baths and comfort stations, since it was found that all the baths were obsolete and in need

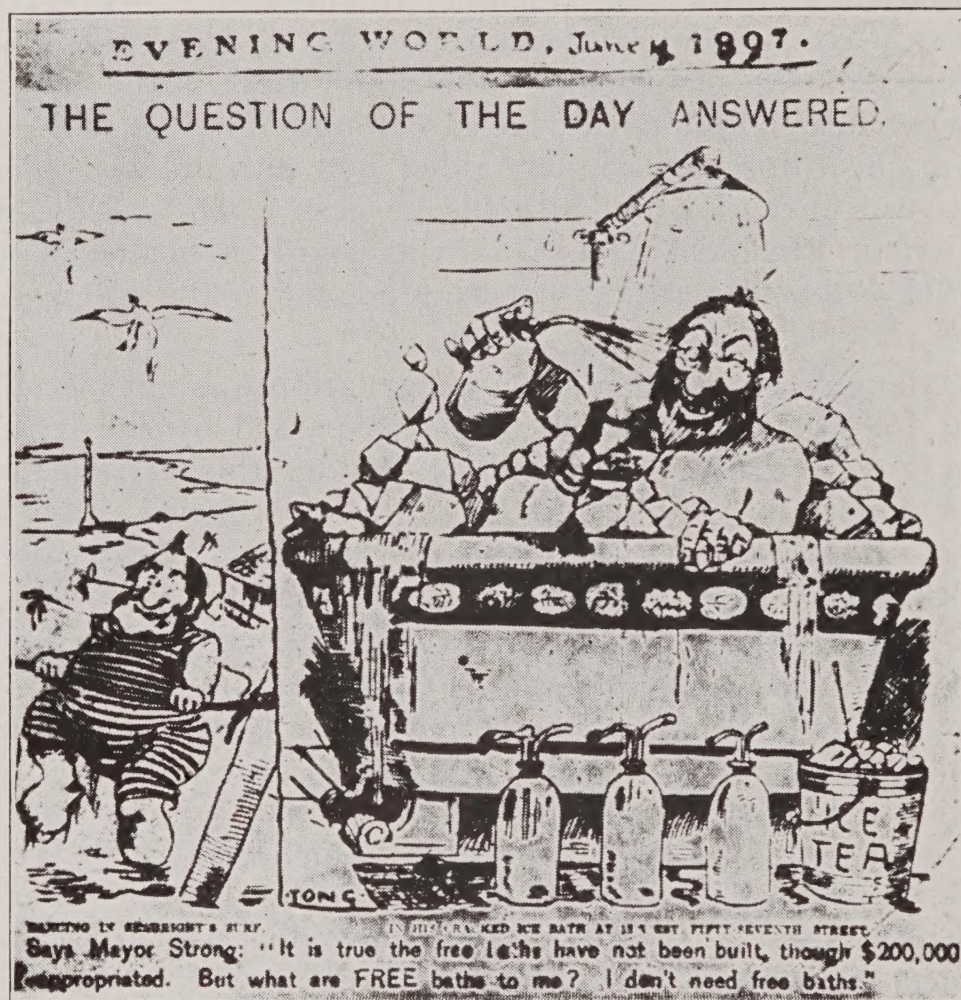


Fig. 5. — This issue of the New York *Evening World* (June 4, 1897) was being hawked outside of the city hall while the mayor was granting the Rivington Street Bath within.

of extensive repairs. The buildings were more than thirty-five years old. The roofs needed replacement. All of the marble partition were cracked—eaten away by the acids of the cleaning materials. Plumbing and heating systems needed replacement.¹⁷ Unfortunately a change in WPA policy caused abandonment of this program after only a portion of the work had been done. Work of renovating the baths continued, however, and by 1943 four of the five public baths of Manhattan had been or were being remodeled along modern lines or being put in usable condition. As part of the post-war program, Manhattan hopes to see to it that all of its public baths are in first class condition.

Meanwhile the old public bath building which had been named after Dr. Baruch had also deteriorated. Furthermore, the structure was hemmed in on both sides by tenements, and it was impossible in the extensive rehabilitation program under way to provide adequate light and air for the structure or to provide any open space adjacent to it. Dr. Baruch's son, Mr.

16. Centennial, Medical College of Virginia, 1838-1938, New York Alumni Association, Medical College of Virginia, June 1, 1937. (Dedicated to the memory of a most distinguished and beloved Alumnus, Dr. Simon Baruch).

17. Lewis, R. F.: Operations of Public Baths and Comfort Stations, Functions and Procedures of the Office of the Borough President of Manhattan, Service Training Course, Session 3A, Dec. 21, 1943.

Bernard Baruch, generously offered \$85,000 for acquisition of adjacent property so as to improve the conveniences of the building and place it in a better setting. The reconstructed bath building, opened on May 17, 1940 (fig. 6), had been provided with additional windows, ventilation, light and enlarged

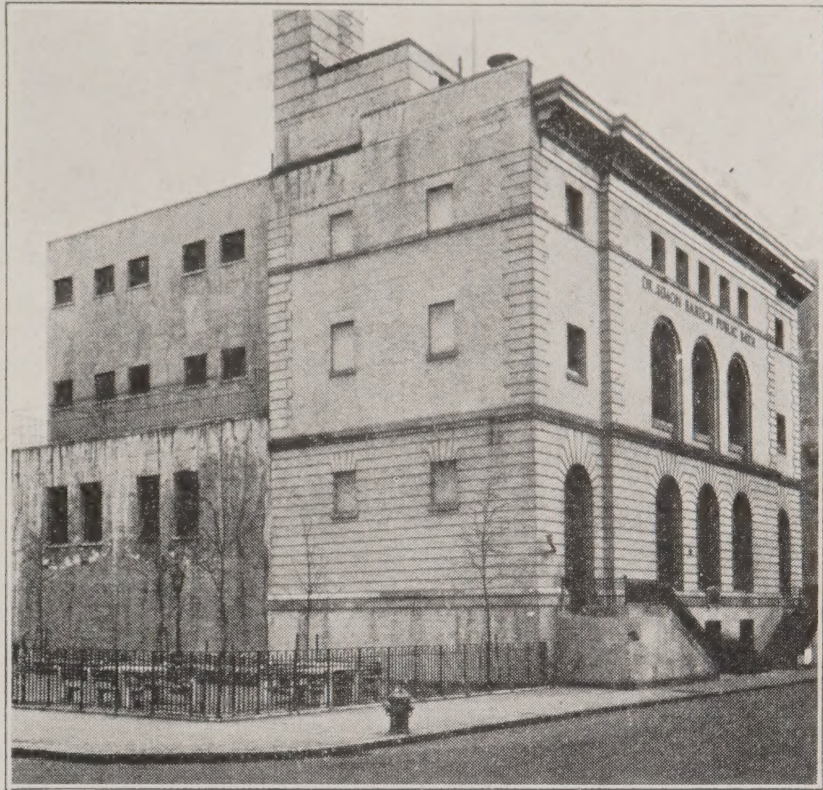


Fig. 6. — The reconstructed Dr. Simon Baruch Public Bath building.

recreation, gymnasium, bathing and swimming facilities. The playground contains, besides a sand pit and shower basin, a brick comfort station and a landscaped sitting area with quiet games for adults, in the center of which is a memorial flagpole bearing a plaque reading:

BARUCH PARK
A GIFT TO THE CITY
BY
BERNARD M. BARUCH
ON THE OCCASION OF THE
RECONSTRUCTION OF THE
BATH ORIGINALLY NAMED IN HONOR OF
HIS FATHER
SIMON BARUCH, M.D.

